

Overholt Co. Worker's House B
Frick Avenue
West Overton
Westmoreland County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5657

HABS
PA
65-OVTW,
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, DC 20013-7127

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

OVERHOLT CO. WORKER'S HOUSE B

HABS No. PA-5657

Location: Frick Avenue (formerly Overbolt Street), West Overton, Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania. Directly across the street from the Christian S. Overbolt Store (HABS No. PA-5656), 200 yards north of the intersection of Township Road 751.

UTM Connellsville Quad 17/622275/4441500

Present Owner: West Overton Museums

Present Occupant: Vacant; awaiting restoration and museum interpretation

Significance: This worker's house is among the best preserved of an early group of such houses associated with the mill and distillery businesses of the Overholt family at West Overton. Although it was lived in for a brief period in 1860-62 by the future coal and iron magnate Henry Clay Frick, its true significance lies in the ordinary workers it sheltered.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Probably before 1854. Although the exact date cannot be precisely determined, it was probably built before May 29, 1854, when Abraham Overbolt, founder of the distilling business, deeded a one-half interest in the entire complex (including this lot) to his eldest son, Henry. This deed describes a plot of 253 acres "on which are erected houses [meaning the grand houses for the family], outhouses, a griss marchant [sic] mill, distillery, barn stables *and the village of Overton* with many other valuable improvements [emphasis added]."¹ The building is indicated on the 1857 atlas.
2. Original and subsequent owners: The following is a partial list of owners of the land on which the building was built, tax parcel #47-14-5-4. Reference is to the Recorder of Deeds, Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania.

¹Deed Book 36, page 584, Westmoreland County Courthouse. Although the A. & H. S. Overholt Company is ambiguously given a separate assessment for "8 acres and houses" in 1862 alone, and more clearly an assessment for "2 new houses" in 1881 and again in 1882, until then the houses are generally not mentioned separately.

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- 1854 Deed May 29, 1854, Book 36, page 584
Abraham Overholt and wife Maria [Stauffer]
to
Henry S. Overholt (son)
1/2 interest in the whole, with lifetime rights to the use of the mansion
reserved for the parents.
- 1870 Henry S. Overholt died intestate on June 18, 1870. The half interest in his
property went to his children, Maria C. Overholt et al., under the
guardianship of John S. R. Overholt.
- 1873 Deed August 18, 1873, Book 81, page 252
John S. R. Overholt, guardian for Maria C. Overholt et al.
to
Aaron S. R. Overholt (son of Rev. John D. Overholt, nephew to Abraham)
et al.
1/2 interest
- 1873 Deed August 18, 1873, Book 81, page 251
Christian S. Overholt and Martin S. Overholt, executors of estate of
Abraham Overholt
to
Aaron S. R. Overholt and Benjamin F. Overholt (son of Henry)
remaining 1/2 interest
- 1878 Deed September 11, 1878, Book 96, page 557
Aaron S. R. Overholt and Benjamin F. Overholt
to
Sarah (wife of Aaron S. R.) Overholt and Maria, Abbie, Abraham C.,
Henry C., and Jennie Overholt (children of Henry S. Overholt, siblings of
Benjamin F. Overholt)
- 1890 Deed May 31, 1890, Book 197, page 52.
Maria C. Overholt, et al.
to
Abraham C. Overholt, et al.
- 1923 Abraham C. Overholt died on January 31, 1923. His wife, Gertrude,
inherited.
- 1929 Deed October 31, 1929, Book 902, page 288 (contains plot plan).
Gertrude T. Overholt, widow, et al.
to
Charles Harmon and Hugh Farrell

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- 1947 Deed July 1, 1947, Book 1316, page 49.
Charles Harmon
to
Elizabeth Eckman
- 1948 Deed July 9, 1948, Book 1325, page 224 (contains plot plan)
Elizabeth Eckman
to
Curtis Soles
- 1952 Deed March 5, 1952, Book 1442, page 576
Curtis P. Soles and Charlotte, his wife
to
Paul E. Mullen and Mary Ellen, his wife
- 1962 Deed January 6, 1962, Book 1847, page 17
Paul E. Mullen
to
Fred Rodman
- 1981 Deed March 26, 1981, Book 2387, page 77
Fred Rodman
to
Paul Lederach
- 1982 Deed October 20, 1982, Book 2458, page 530
Paul Lederach
to
Westmoreland-Fayette County Historical Society, the present owners, who
have changed their name to West Overton Museums
3. Original plans, builders and suppliers: There are no known plans or records of builders, but it is possible that the people hired to construct the large mill in 1859 also were involved in these earlier buildings. The datestone for the mill lists D. P. Patterson, millwright [not likely to be involved in house-building]; M. Miller, Senr., carpenter; and Dillon & Gilbert, bricklayers.
4. Additions and alterations: The exterior of this house has been stuccoed with a light buff material and scored with a brick pattern (which does not match the original pattern beneath it exactly). Interior alterations were limited to sheathing the original walls with modern veneer panelling.
- B. Historical Context: Information on company employees who were likely to have occupied this house or others like it is found in the HABS report on West Overton, HABS No. PA-5654.

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An Overholt family diary attests that the John W. Frick family lived in this particular worker's house in 1860-62. John W. Frick "carried wheat upstairs and worked the fat pump."² The company ledger confirms that he was a miller, at the high end of a decent salary of \$1.00 a day, and locally present, buying bran for his horses in small amounts and more frequently than anybody else in town (about every three days). He also paid rent for this property, which at \$12.50 for three months was also the high end of the scale (ranging down to a low of \$3.00 quarterly). Like many of the village residents, the Frick family was temporary, moving on in 1863 to Henry Durstine's house, north of the village, where J. W. Frick did some quarrying. Although at present we do not know their names or specific occupations, there were undoubtedly many other company workers who occupied this house over the years, including coal workers in the 1880s and '90s.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural Character: Built at the southwest end of the row of workers' houses constituting the "Village of West Overton," as mentioned in the deed of 1854, this house and its mate next door are probably among the first houses built for the company. Although the exteriors of the extant company houses are essentially uniform, the variety of rents in the village indicates that there was likely some difference of prestige of location (further up the hill) or even a variety of finishes within them. The relatively fine mantels found in the upstairs chamber of this house and its mate, and the higher rent Frick paid for it, confirms its (probable) status at the upper end of such a hierarchy. Those who rented the frame tenant houses (or even the "shanties" also mentioned in the tax records) undoubtedly paid the least. The extant house at the top of the hill, however, does exhibit a plaster ceiling (covering early split lath) and "Greek" trim, of earlier profile than the house Frick was in.
2. Condition of the fabric: The exterior brick masonry is sound, but has been covered with a hard yellowish stucco on the sides and rear. A porch, formerly on the front facade, has been removed. The interiors were extensively sheathed in wallpapers and modern veneer "panelling" over the years, but some of this has now been removed in anticipation of interpretation and full restoration.

B. Description of the Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The two-and-a-half-story house has a full basement, and measures approximately 26'-2" x 18'-3".

²Karl Frick Overholt, written as a remembrance of the life of his mother Maria Frick (John W. Frick's first daughter and older sister to Henry Clay Frick), in collection of West Overton Museum Archives.

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2. Foundations: The foundations are rubble stone, with only the large interlocking corner blocks being roughly squared. There is no setback at the brick to form a water table; the brick and stone surfaces are flush.
3. Wall Construction: The exterior walls are of machine-made red brick, 1'-1" thick, set in Flemish bond. This brick bond has a history of associations of refinement, dating back to at least the seventeenth century, and is somewhat surprising to be found on a worker's house of this period (especially as the family/managerial house across the street is set in common bond on the primary facades). It may indicate either a somewhat earlier date of construction, or, more probably, an old-fashioned cast to this building. Lintels of all doors and windows (including basement) are wood. At the eaves of the front and rear facades are four projecting corbel courses, with alternating courses of these bricks set at a decorative diagonal pattern. This pattern is fully comparable to but different from the one found on the family houses across the street. As mentioned, the sides and rear have been stuccoed and scored to resemble brick, but the pattern (and perhaps the brick bond represented) does not match the original beneath it exactly.
4. Structural system, framing: Exterior walls are load-bearing brick. First-floor joists are 3" x 8", exposed, with the straight vertical kerf marks of the up-and-down sash saw, on 2'-3" centers. Second-floor joists are slightly smaller at 2 1/2" x 7 3/4", also originally exposed. The summer beam (hewn, 8" x 8 3/4") runs parallel to the ridge, and is partially supported near the mid point by a small post (3 3/4" x 4") tangent to the central partition and next to the door connecting the two rooms. Roof rafters are half-lapped and pegged at the peak, sash-sawn, 3" x 4" tapering to 4 1/2". They toe into a 1"-thick false plate at the eaves. The joists are set into the top of the brick walls, but are truncated diagonally such that the roof sets low upon them. The corbelled courses of the eave are actually several courses below the joists, and the false plate carrying the rafters actually sits well inside the line of the brick (instead of outside of it, on the projecting ends of the joists, as in much traditional construction). This unusual arrangement allows a greater height to the second-floor ceilings (at the expense of an ample attic), without increasing the overall height of the building. This configuration also adjusts or allows for the smaller second-floor windows.
5. Porches: A photograph from about 1913 shows a small frame hipped-roof porch protecting the front door and one window to the left.³ A ghost from this porch is still visible on the masonry. The posts have slender turnings of machine millwork (not the chamfered "pencil" posts of the early nineteenth century) and thus could date somewhat after the original construction. The railings were three horizontal boards, approximately 4" high, the top one capped. The steps opposite the door are wooden as well.

³West Overton Museum Archives.

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6. **Chimneys:** There are two chimneys, each with two flues, at either end of the house. The southwest chimney served a fireplace in the basement and probably on the first floor; the northeast chimney served fireplaces on the two dwelling floors. They have both been rebuilt from below the peak of the roof.
7. **Openings:**
 - a. **Doorways and doors:** The front door is located just right of center on the facade. The circa 1913 photograph shows the original door to have been a standard six-panel molded door with the panels painted a lighter color than the stiles and rails, in traditional German fashion. The four-pane transom is still in place above the opening, but the door itself has been replaced. The rear door is missing entirely.
 - b. **Windows:** The two front windows are located nearly equidistant from the front door; thus the entire composition is off-center to the building. The lower windows are taller than those above; the circa 1913 photograph shows the original sash to have been double-hung, six-over-six-light above and six-over-nine-light below. There was a similar configuration of windows on the rear, no windows at all on the south gable and one small (four-pane) window in the attic on the northeast gable.
8. **Roof:** The ridge of the gable roof runs parallel to the facade and is covered with nailed slate shingles. Each shingle measures 1'-6" x 9"; there is a tin cap at the peak of some age. Numerous "extra" nail holes in the roofers suggest that it was preceded by another covering, probably of wooden shingles.

C. **Description of Interior:**

1. **Floor plans:**
 - a. **Cellar:** The cellar is a single open room, with a fireplace in the south wall. A 3/4 height door opens to the rear at this end, with a door or window (now removed) of the same size opposite it, both serving to give good light to the work activities at the fireplace adjacent. Wall and ceiling were unfinished and exposed.
 - b. **First- and second-floor plans:** The two floor plans are virtually identical, with each floor divided by a board partition just to the left of the "central" door or window. This makes the classic hall and parlor floor plan of English vernacular design. Both first-floor rooms very probably had fireplaces, though the openings have both been closed and obscured by numerous patchings, paintings and wallpaperings. On the second floor the northeast room fireplace and mantel are still extant; in the southwest room an unbroken chairrail across the chimney stack wall attests that there never was a fireplace there (the second flue goes to the basement). The

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enclosed winder stairs to both floors are located in the front right corner of the inner room.

There is an enclosed cabinet to the left of the fireplace in the first "door" or outer room, and partial evidence that a matching cabinet existed to the right of this fireplace as well. This arrangement, along with a mantel for the fire, would have made a decidedly formal statement in that room. However, in the space next to the fireplace in the first-floor inner room (narrower and deeper and thus even more of a candidate for a closet), a peg rail and chairrail both encircle this plastered niche, indicating it originally had no door. This odd arrangement would contribute to a more informal feel to this room, simultaneously making any objects stored in this niche both visible in their jumble, and easier to reach.

In building this housing for their workers, the Overholts adopted the precedent of other worker's housing, derived, as was slave housing, from English vernacular tradition, not from their own ethnic German tradition. The room uses are in fact reversed from the eighteenth-century English antecedents: the "hall" of the early "hall and parlor" house is the larger of the two rooms, just inside the door. It contained the main cooking hearth and was the informal room of all occasions, the social center of the house. The parlor, more formal and reserved for ceremonial occasions, was the inner, more private realm. However, the architectural evidence described above (the differences in the closets) indicates the reverse, that the outer room in this worker's house was the formal room, and that the kitchen was in the inner room, more removed from social and public traffic.

There is a single piece of documentary evidence which might shed light on the way workers lived in their houses, and it supports this reading of the architectural evidence. This is an inventory of a worker's dwelling--an exceedingly rare item in itself, and one that refers to one of the houses on this street. It is the inventory for Peter Cruse, whom the 1880 tax records describe as the "miller at O. mills," and the census of that year lists as living next to Jac[ob] Tinstman and thus the store and house.⁴

Peter Cruse's inventory lists a total of seventeen items--compared to Henry S. Overholt's 172. It begins with a sword worth 25 cents (a memento of the

⁴Cruse will also surely be found in the 1880 company account books when they are examined. I suspect he will be paying comparable rent to John W. Frick, though I currently trust the census that he was in the house next to the store, which with its early back wing, had room enough for the two other families that the census lists under the same roof. Additionally, oral tradition (interview with Dan Albright, the current inhabitant, quoting his school teacher, Thomas Crawford) confirms that Cruse lived next to the store. J. W. Frick, in any event, had removed to Wooster, Ohio, before his death, so his inventory won't be found in PA, but Cruse is in every other way comparable in status and vocation to the one person we know was living in the house under discussion. Cruse died in late 1889 and his estate was appraised on January 21, 1890, so the document most likely does refer to his life at West Overton; Karl Frick Overholt still referred to one of the village houses as the "Peter Cruse house" in a letter dated March 25, 1924 (WOM Archives), even though all the other houses bore the names of the families in them then.

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Civil War?) and ends with his cow, his most valuable possession at \$25. Five lots (nearly 30 percent of the items; 44 percent of the total value) are for beds, found toward the beginning of the list at lots 3, 6, 9, 10, and 11, that is to say, probably in every room. The two items of kitchen equipment, a "kitchen safe" worth \$1.00, and "Kitchen chairs" worth \$.50, are at the end of the list. Though it is unreasonable to assume that these were in the upstairs rooms, this placement on the list strongly suggests that the kitchen was in the inner room, removed from the front door, not the outer one, now a living room/parlor, and by necessity, a bedroom. Although compromised by the need to have beds virtually everywhere, this furniture arrangement does suggest that, though the spatial configuration of the rooms had remained visibly open, workers in the second half of the nineteenth century were living in these houses in the more protectively private patterns common to other (and more elite) housetypes.

2. Stairs: The stairs of both floors are enclosed with random-width (5" to 7 1/2") beaded boards. Approximately 3' wide, these stairs begin with winder treads, and continue with short-footed straight treads just less than 8" deep.
3. Flooring: Attic floors are 3/4" thick, random-width (1'-0 3/4" to 9 3/4") pine tongue and groove. The lower floors are probably of somewhat more refined cast, that is, narrower boards, but they are thoroughly covered by vinyl.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Although all but covered with acoustic tile at this time, the ceilings of all four rooms were originally exposed to the joists and whitewashed. This originally included the second-floor north room with its fine mantel, but this room did receive a ceiling of 3 1/4" boards, sometime in the early twentieth century.

The central partition wall is one board thick, random-width and beaded. Architraves to the central door (connecting the two rooms) is flat; window architraves carry the broad flattened cymas of the later nineteenth century, indicating there could have been an effort to upgrade sometime after construction. (Such moldings are extant on the first floor only.) Exterior walls are plastered and evidence of chair rails is clear on all surfaces (although that on the second-floor central partition shows whitewash beneath it). There are baseboards throughout the house. Many layers of wallpaper have been applied, indicating rapid turnover in these dwellings.

5. Decorative features: Interior doors to the stairs are six-panel; the doors to the closet are split into an upper and lower part, with three panels of graduated sizes in the upper doors and a single large panel in the lower. The chamber mantel features a fat ovolo bolection molding surrounding the firebox (i.e., no pilasters), with a narrow panel in the frieze above it, and a deeply molded cornice forming a shelf above that. The moldings of the cornice are typical of the Greek Revival vernacular style, including the odd blade-like molding often found as an

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undercrown. Unfortunately, all other mantels in the house have been removed and their openings obscured.

6. Heating: The fireplace in the second-floor northeast room remains open, but it is probable that it originally contained a cast-iron coal grate within the mantel. The company ledger indicates that John W. Frick bought loads of coal (at \$.50 apiece) on March 6, May 16, and September 1, or about once every three months; thus it is clear that coal was used as the fuel for cooking as well as heating. On April 4, 1862, Theodore Harshman, a cooper just setting up house in one of these houses (he paid three months rent on June 30), bought a "cook stove and trimmings" for a whopping \$26. This must surely also have been designed for the use of coal. The upstairs rooms at this house have no stovepipe holes, so heat in the south room (sans fireplace) must have percolated up through the floor grate only.

D. Site:

1. General setting: The house faces northwest onto Overholt Street (now named Frick Avenue). The Mount Pleasant Baptist Church purchased a small lot on the street to the north of this house on October 27, 1886, and built a church with simple Gothic windows.⁵ The 1911 photograph shows that it was still present at that time, but all traces have disappeared today.
2. Outbuildings: The 1867 and 1876 atlases of West Overton show that each of the workers' houses on Overholt Street was equipped with a small building to the rear. A photograph in the Stotz collection taken in the early 1930s, just after the Rte. 819 bypass was constructed cutting these buildings off from the rest of the village, shows them to be brick, and more interestingly, to have bright markings on them in the form of large X's. These markings appear to be the traces of brick open-work ventilators (such as are found on the extant brick horse barn), which have been filled in with bright new mortar. Photographs taken before the application of vinyl siding confirms these ventilators were present and that, by tradition, the buildings were originally stables (interview with Charles Miller). In addition, some of the renters of company houses were known to have cows: Peter Cruse's cow has been mentioned, and J. W. Frick bought bran (presumably for a horse or cow) on a frequent basis. However, the 1876 atlas view depicts these outbuildings with dwelling windows rather than ventilators, indicating that they had been converted to housing. The back buildings to the workers' houses were all built directly in line with the south gable of the Overholt Street houses.
3. Landscaping, enclosures: The 1876 Atlas view depicts substantial but randomly spaced trees along the east side of Overholt Street in front of some of the workers' houses. However, the front yards otherwise appear bare, and there are no fences along the street, as there are on the "family" side of the street. The

⁵Deed Book 153, page 437.

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sides and rears of the worker lots are fenced, however, from each other, and along the rear alley, behind the backbuildings. These fences are made with sawn rail, instead of the pickets that enclosed all of Henry S. Overholt's house and garden.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Maps and Atlases:

Beers, S. N. and D. G. Atlas of Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania. Philadelphia: A. Pomeroy, 1867.
Page 23: map of West Overton

Davis, F. A. New Illustrated Atlas of Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, 1876 with 1971 Supplementary Section. Rimersburg, PA: Pennsylvania Record Press, 1971; originally published by Reading Publishing Company, 1876.
Page 51: map of West Overton. Buildings identical to 1867 map, names different.
Page 53: full-page, perspective view of West Overton. Detailed and informative.
Page 80: map of West Overton, with slightly different buildings than page 51, also railway and coke ovens.

Lake, D. J., and N. S. Ames. Map of Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania. New York: Wm. J. Barker, 1857.
Includes map of "Overton," with buildings indicated schematically.

B. Photographs:

Stotz Collection (Western Pennsylvania Architectural Survey), Carnegie Library, Pittsburgh. Photographs taken in 1932-35 include workers' houses as well as the main house and spring house.

West Overton Museums Archives has copies of a number of historic photographs on slides, including views of the store and a worker's house taken ca. 1913.

D. Bibliography:

Karl Overholt Diary, West Overton Museums Archives.

U.S. Census, Population Schedules, 1850, 1860, 1870, 1880.

Deed books, Westmoreland County Courthouse, Greensburg, PA.

Tax assessment records, Westmoreland County Courthouse, Greensburg, PA.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

Documentation of the West Overton site was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record, a division of the National Park Service, in conjunction with America's Industrial Heritage Project and the West Overton Museums. The project was under the direction of Gray Fitzsimons, HAER Historian, and Joseph Balachowski, HABS Architect. Documentation was begun in 1990 by Victoria Fleming (University of Florida), Supervisor; architects Janet Chen (Illinois Institute of Technology), Robert G. Colosimo (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, through ICOMOS), and Richard J. P. Renaud (Lawrence Technological University); and historian Charles Bergengren (University of the Arts, Philadelphia). This historical report was edited in the HABS office by Alison K. Hoagland, HABS senior historian, in 1991-92.